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INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 9322  
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 0755

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: NORTH KOREA

Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies focused news coverage August 6 on the safety concerns over a reconstruction project in Taipei City; on Typhoon Morakot, which is approaching Taiwan; on the death of a well-known local entertainer; and on the two U.S. reporters freed from North Korea. In terms of editorials and commentaries, a column in the mass-circulation "Apple Daily" called North Korean Leader Kim Jong Il the biggest winner in the release of the two U.S. journalists. The article said Kim has closed a deal with the United States without the slightest effort. A news analysis in the pro-unification "United Daily News" said that, with careful planning and calculations, North Korea will seek something back from the United States. An editorial in the conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" praised U.S. President Barack Obama for picking former President Bill Clinton to secure the release of the two American journalists from North Korea. The article said Washington has improved the atmosphere in its relations with Pyongyang "at little cost to its own prestige and honor." A separate "China Post" op-ed piece said North Korea's pardon of the two American journalists suggests the possibility that the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula may be resolved diplomatically. End summary.

A) "A Deal for Kim Jong Il That Costs Him Nothing"

Columnist Antonio Chiang wrote in his column in the mass-circulation "Apple Daily" [circulation: 520,000] (8/6):

"[Former U.S. President Bill] Clinton paid a lightening visit to Pyongyang and successfully brought the two female journalists back to the United States. Washington offered a chance [for Pyongyang] to get out of the current predicament, and Kim Jong Il helped save [the United States'] face by doing it a favor. Both sides got what they wanted, but Kim Jong Il is the biggest winner, because he has closed a deal which cost him nothing. ... Both Japan and South Korea were not too happy about Clinton's trip. What were the contents of the 'sincere conversation' between Clinton and Kim? Did the two make a secret deal? Will there be any change in [U.S. President Bill] Clinton's position toward North Korea? Will the sanctions against Pyongyang be replaced by a diplomatic dialogue? This series of questions matter significantly for security relations in East Asia. ...

"Now the ball is in Washington's court, but the Republican Party will surely make things difficult for Obama if [he decides to] handle the nuclear weapons of North Korea and those of Iran separately. Washington has a lot of issues that it wants to discuss with Japan and South Korea, but for Kim Jong Il, he simply played a game without the slightest effort, which shook up the situation in East Asia. He indeed deserves the title of being a 'rogue strategist.'"

B) "With Careful Planning and Calculations, North Korea Wants Something in Exchange"

Lee Ming, professor of the Department of Diplomacy at the National Chengchi University, opined in the pro-unification "United Daily

News" [circulation: 400,000] (8/6):

"... What is noteworthy is that [Secretary] Hillary Clinton supports Bill Clinton's action and is totally aware of the role and function her husband played. [President Barack] Obama, needless to say, is clearly aware that the significance of Clinton's trip this time was not just to save people. Clinton expressed words of apology to North Korea (Pyongyang said so, but he personally denied it), and Pyongyang also granted a 'special pardon' [to the detained journalists]. North Korea further anticipates that the bilateral relationship will improve because of it, so that it will be able to feel out the possibility of holding bilateral talks with the United States in addition to the Six-Party talks. ... Pyongyang (allowed) a peaceful ending by releasing the two journalists this time in exchange for the 'gratitude' of the United States, and it will not be too surprising if Washington pays something back to Pyongyang in the future."

C) "Bill Clinton Scores a Big Success in Pyongyang"

The conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (8/6):

"... Now that [North Korea leader] Kim [Jong-Il] has held his public meeting with [former United States President Bill] Clinton, there can be no doubt that Kim remains fully in charge of the North Korean state. Like the rest of the world, Taiwan is eager to hear what the former U.S. president has to say about his meeting with Kim Jong-Il and what topics might have been discussed during their meetings. ... For his part, [United States President Barack] Obama had to come up with some kind of an arrangement to get the two reporters back home without appearing to reward Pyongyang for its reckless behavior.

"His choice of Bill Clinton, a high-profile former president who remains a leading figure in his Democratic Party, was brilliant. On the one hand, Clinton is a senior enough figure to give adequate face to the North Korean regime. The fact that Clinton's wife is secretary of state also added to the prestige. But on the other hand, Obama deliberately chose not to dispatch any high-ranking senior officials from his own administration, giving him plausible deniability if the mission failed to produce any results. The criticism about rewarding bad behavior makes sense in terms of Western values and culture. But in Asia, the visit was largely viewed as a small face-saving mean of giving Pyongyang a way out of the corner it had painted itself into.

"By sending a former president to spend a few hours with Kim Jong-Il, the U.S. has improved the atmosphere of bilateral relations at little cost to its own prestige and honor. Depending on what Kim is up to now, North Korea might once again decide that the time is right to make progress on more substantial issues in its interaction with the rest of the world."

D) "U.S.-North Korea Relations Are Fragile"

Nehginpao Kipgen, a political analyst and general secretary of the U.S.-based Kuki International Forum, opined in the conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] (8/6):

"... While North Korea has been condemned by the international community over its nuclear test in May and the subsequent U.N. Security Council's unanimously adopted tightened sanctions, Pyongyang is seeking a chance to show its good actions to the world. The latest development on securing the successful release of Laura Ling and Euna Lee was a sign of seeing room for resolving the strained relations between Washington and Pyongyang through diplomatic means. The pardon and release was described as 'humanitarian and peace-loving policy' by the North Korean leadership. If there continues to exist a willingness on the part of both Washington and Pyongyang for a negotiated solution, there is hope that the North Korean nuclear crisis can be resolved diplomatically."

WANG